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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEMAYEL SEES LIGHT AT THE END OF A VERY
DARK TUNNEL

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Former President Amin Gemayel believes that the chaotic situation in the Lebanese government will get worse, and factions may take to the streets before it is resolved, but he does see hope for resolution. Gemayel is convinced that the supporters of the current government will remain firm, and that everyone will recognize the need for compromise. Aoun will not get the presidency, some outside pressure may be required to help the government through its current crisis. A new president and a new government may be able to work well together. End Summary.

SYRIA AND IRAN MOVING APART

2. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador on November 14, former President Amin Gemayel shared his view of the current political struggles in Lebanon. Initially explaining that Syrian and Iranian interests in Lebanon have diverged, he argued that nevertheless, neither is satisfied with the current formula of power sharing. Their dissatisfaction is not as Shiites, but as interested outside political powers. While the Syrians have nothing to lose, having lost both their military presence and much of their intelligence machinery within Lebanon, the Iranians have gained tremendously in their influence in the country.

3. (C) The result of this divergence is that Syria would support a move to chaos, especially if it would have a negative effect on the international tribunal to try suspects in the Hariri assassination and other crimes. At this point, Syria needs Hizballah. Iran, conversely, is directing Hizballah, and stands to lose ground in a chaotic Lebanon. Although Gemayel stated that this results in a paradox -- why is Hizballah willing to resort to chaos? -- Gemayel made it clear that he does not believe that Hizballah will go that far.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

5. (C) Gemayel's vision of the near term is of increasing confrontations, disturbances, and a large degree of brinksmanship. But finally, no one will "break the ship," because "Lebanon means compromise" and there will be a solution because there is a balance of power. He views the

confrontations as initially political, with "the street" used to assist political goals. He sees debate over constitutional interpretations, sit-ins, and increasing violence. Hizballah will be better at this, because they have military, financial and political influence over the Shiites, and can use their supporters in a display of "nizaam arsous" or paramilitary demonstrations. But because the pro-government factions are a strong "alliance of conviction," they are also "strong in the street" now. Not only is the March 14 coalition firm, but so are the Sunnis and the Druze as confessional groups. Gemayel, like others, appeared firmly convinced of this.

16. (C) Gemayel believes that when the confrontations become unbearable, there will be a kind of intervention, possibly from outside, which will force a compromise between the government and the presidency. Because the presidency is "more and more on the table," no one will be able to avoid discussing it. Already in the national dialogue and current consultations, the presidency has been recognized as an issue that needs to be addressed. The change in government and the presidency will be a "package deal".

17. (C) Asked how long this process might take, Gemayel sees the first phase as dangerous, as all groups purge themselves. Hizballah will push things, but cannot afford to go too far, because in the event of a vacuum, they cannot be sure that they will be able to fill the void, rather than other Islamic extremist groups. Suggesting that outcomes might include the resignation of parliament, or of the Prime Minister, Gemayel imagined that Hizballah might find itself with no functioning government, and therefore no enemy. This would inevitably invite international oversight, which is neither in the interest of Syria nor of Hizballah.

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WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE AOUN?

18. (C) General Aoun is uncomfortable, according to Gemayel. Aoun does not know what to do or how to behave. Asking the Ambassador about his meeting the previous day with Aoun, Gemayel said it would be better if other countries did not invite Aoun to visit. In particular, he cited Aoun's reported end-run around the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon, going straight to Riyadh to talk about a meeting. Gemayel said a meeting in Riyadh of all Lebanese Christian leaders, as a counterbalance to Aoun's visit, would be wrong and Gemayel would not attend. Expressing hope that the U.S. could use its influence to get the invitations cancelled, Gemayel also complained about a Kuwaiti invitation to Aoun to visit.

19. (C) Previously, Hizballah viewed Aoun as a "serious candidate," but not its candidate, for the Lebanese presidency. But now their position is that Aoun has been upgraded to Hizballah's candidate. However, Aoun is not the candidate of Parliament Speaker Berri, and if a compromise is brokered, there is no way to bring Aoun in as president. Gemayel believes that there will come a point in the process where Aoun will understand this, and where Hizballah will tell Aoun that they cannot impose him as president against the will of the others. Aoun will then be obliged to recognize the depth of the crisis. If Hizballah's Nasrallah wants a national unity government, he cannot oppose a new president, recognizing that Lahoud has completely lost all credibility. Currently, even Aoun cannot visit Lahoud, which indicates both a real crisis, and also a recognition that Lahoud is dispensable.

A FLEXIBLE NEW GOVERNMENT

110. (C) Gemayel painted an attractive picture of a possible new government, if both the new president and the prime

minister are flexible. A new president would be necessary because he would serve as "a fair referee," over a group of ministers who might be "black, white and gray", rather than polarized as at present. In Gemayel's view, a group of neutral ministers could promote good governance. First, there would need to be a compromise among the Lebanese, and possibly an agreement something like Taif.

¶11. (C) Asked about the long-term prospects with Syria and Hizballah in this event, Gemayel said that neither could be expected to change overnight. The Syrians would need to put aside their ambitions for Lebanon, which will be difficult because most Syrians consider Lebanon to be a part of Syria. Although Gemayel thought these changes might need to be brought about by outside influences, he nevertheless wanted to know what was up with Blair sending an envoy to Syria recently.

WHO COULD BE PRESIDENT?

¶12. (C) In a one-on-one session with the Ambassador at the end of the meeting, Gemayel discussed potential candidates for the presidency. He provided a description of a hypothetically ideal candidate from his point of view (that sounded very close to defining Amin Gemayel himself). After dismissing rumors that he yearns to return to Baabda Palace, Gemayel concluded that a successful candidate must be able to talk to both March 14 and March 8 politicians. He mentioned Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, former Foreign Minister Jean Obeid, and Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh as possibilities, although he doubted Obeid has cut his ties to Syria sufficiently. But Gemayel's favorite candidate was for someone outside Lebanon: Carlos Ghosn, Chairman of Nissan-Renault. Lebanese in origin, Ghosn has the experience and the weight to restore the presidency, Gemayel said. (In a strange coincidence, Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh mentioned Ghosn to the Ambassador in a later meeting on the same day. Hamadeh, who claimed to be a friend of Ghosn, said that he is going to test the waters with Ghosn privately.)

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Gemayel's analysis of a potential divergence in Syrian and Iranian interests in Lebanon was intriguing.

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Egyptian Ambassador Hussein Derar, in a 11/15 meeting with the Ambassador, offered the same analysis: Iran has an interest in Lebanon's stability, given Hizballah's power; Syria has an interest in chaos in Lebanon, in order to have an opportunity fill the vacuum. But Derar said that his government concluded that Iran would cede the local political ground to Syria, so Syria's desires trump Iran's.

FELTMAN